

Opening a Fourth Portal for Entry by Troops—Programs for Junior Youth

In its message dated 27 December 2005 to the Conference of the Continental Boards of Counsellors, the Universal House of Justice highlighted the successful experience in the Bahá'í world regarding “programs aimed at the spiritual empowerment of junior youth.” The House of Justice elaborated:

So impressed are we by the results already achieved, and so compelling is the need, that we will urge all National Assemblies to consider the junior youth groups formed through programs implemented by their training institutes a fourth core activity in its own right and to promote its wide-scale multiplication.

The announcement that junior youth programs would be pursued systematically and vigorously by training institutes, with the aim of “wide-scale multiplication,” has created a great deal of excitement in the community about reaching this important special population and tapping its potential for advancing the process of entry by troops.

As far back as 2000, the Supreme Body in its Ridván message had referred to the junior youth stage as a distinctive period in the development of an individual and called for special programs suited to the particular needs of this age group.

Among the young ones in the community are those known as junior youth, who fall between the ages of, say, 12 and 15. They represent a special group with special needs as they are somewhat in between childhood and youth when many changes are occurring within them. Creative attention must be devoted to involving them in programs of activity that will engage their interests, mold their capacities for teaching and service, and involve them in social interaction with older youth. The employment of the arts in various forms can be of great value in such activity.

The response to this call was limited, as activities for junior youth in many countries continued to be an adjunct to children's education. However, with the introduction of the Junior Youth Spiritual Empowerment program, which was initially promoted by the Office of Social and Economic Development, efforts advanced to a new stage. The materials for this program were first utilized in the junior youth programs undertaken by Bahá'í-inspired organizations. These materials then became more widely adopted through training institutes. An increasing number of junior youth animators have been trained so that at this date more than 2,000 junior youth groups have been formed, mainly in advanced clusters, involving nearly 20,000 participants, of whom less than half are from Bahá'í families.

By focusing on young people at a formative stage in their lives, the process of spiritual and moral education can exert its maximum effect and the spirit of the Teachings can directly affect the character of a new generation. Moreover, as the House of Justice explained, when the junior youth are “encouraged to enter the main sequence of institute courses at the age of

fifteen, they represent a vast reservoir of energy and talent that can be devoted to the advancement of spiritual and material civilization.”

Any vision for systematic growth needs to incorporate junior youth. Therefore, it is expected that programs for this special group would be integrated into plans for intensive programs of growth. Yet “whatever the nature of the cluster,” close attention to junior youth is “imperative,” and this is an area of activity in the forthcoming Five Year Plan that requires early action. We hope that the accounts shared in this newsletter from countries that have already had significant experience with junior youth will be useful in planning and implementing new programs.

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Formation of groups

At the outset of the establishment of a junior youth program, groups are formed by identifying young people interested in participating in the initiative. The following descriptions explain how groups were formed in two different settings.

Canada. During an expansion phase of the intensive program of growth in the Ottawa cluster, a team comprised of six friends chose a neighborhood, one with a high number of immigrants, and surveyed it. The team secured a venue for the activities it had planned for junior youth, made posters to invite them to a series of events, and put the notices up in community centers and on telephone poles. The members of the team then went out in pairs, door to door and in the park, and invited junior youth to attend. In one evening they visited 55 homes and found 38 of these to be receptive. They also invited 22 other junior youth from the parks and streets in the neighborhood.

Thirty-nine junior youth and children participated in a week-long program of varied social, artistic, and sporting activities. At the close of each day, a presentation was delivered on the importance of junior youth developing the capabilities required to contribute to the betterment of society. Junior youth were then invited to register to participate in groups. Seventeen junior youth formally registered with the complete support of their parents.

The learning from this experience has helped the friends identify the factors that contribute to the success of forming neighborhood junior youth groups, as shown by the following statement:

As long as there is an old mode of thinking about junior youth coming together in a centralized group, there will be logistical problems with movement and support to get junior youth to these activities. If junior youth groups are confined to centralized classes, it could limit the activity of the group and it does not attract junior youth who are not Bahá’ís. Some communities have not yet reached the awareness of the need to form junior youth groups as sector and neighborhood activities, so that they are within walking distance for junior youth.

France. Through persistent and dedicated efforts, a group of Bahá’ís was able to form a junior youth group in the Créteil-Nogent cluster of Paris. At first, those involved had difficulty visualizing how it could be done and were apprehensive about approaching institutions where the program might be initiated. With the encouragement of the national training institute, the

friends searched for a location that would be receptive to using the junior youth material. After trying different places, a large educational center showed interest.

Initially the center asked that the volunteer animators work only with children. The volunteers reported that after seeing the positive effects of their efforts on the children, “those who were cold to us initially were suddenly so warm and appreciative of what we were doing.” The animators had merely to mention the junior youth program and the center immediately arranged for a group of 12 junior youth to begin studying “Breezes of Confirmation” the following week. The Bahá’ís were amazed that they were able to speak openly and freely about the Faith and explain that the program is inspired by the Teachings of the Faith. All this took place during the week of great unrest in Paris and a time of soul searching. The believers wrote that it was a “living confirmation” that the Blessed Beauty was assisting them.

Holding intensive campaigns

In some countries, programs for junior youth have been given a kick start, particularly in rural areas, through the implementation of intensive campaigns that deploy older youth as animators. These campaigns are generally held during school holidays and follow-up support is provided afterwards. The youth volunteers gather at a training camp for an intensive program. Then they travel to selected villages or neighborhoods and stay there for a number of weeks. In the villages they often live with the families. They are able to form junior youth groups that meet often and thus make considerable progress with the program in a short time.

Mongolia. A junior youth spiritual empowerment program had been introduced a few years previously, and since then intensive programs of growth had been initiated in certain clusters. A training camp was organized to develop human resources to work with junior youth in two of these clusters in particular. A total of 58 participants attended. During the training, plans were made for campaigns to be carried out in eight locations in two clusters over a three-year period. Many volunteers committed to spend their summer holidays in the villages and then to visit them regularly during the year in order to maintain contact with the junior youth there. Each animator made plans to form one urban and one rural group. Administrators from the clusters also took part in the training and consulted about their communities. Consideration was given as to how the entire population of junior youth in the clusters could be reached. The participants estimated how many groups they could each form, as well as how many youth were proceeding through the sequence of courses and would be ready for future animator training sessions, four of which were planned for the year ahead. As they calculated the increase in the number of groups each year, the friends saw that it was possible within a three-year period to involve the entire junior youth population in a cluster in the program.

United States. Intensive campaigns are also successful in urban areas. Project Badi is an annual four-week summer youth teaching and service project of the Magdalene Carney Bahá’í Institute in Florida. One of the components of this endeavor entails preparing Bahá’í youth with the capabilities required to engage junior youth in activities aimed at their spiritual empowerment. A focus of the project is offering reading circles to improve the skills of these young people. The project has been carried out in four predominantly African-American and Caribbean neighborhoods in the Broward, Tampa, and Palm Beach clusters, all of which are areas where intensive programs of growth have been launched. The Badi project consists of four fundamental aspects: training, service, teaching, and reflection.

During the initial phase of the project, youth complete their study of the main sequence of courses. They also receive animator training and instruction on how to initiate and sustain a reading circle and on themes related to service-oriented leadership. The youth then form reading circles for junior youth in the specified neighborhoods. These circles are held on a daily basis for a period of two hours. The activities of the reading circles generally take place under a tree or shaded area in front of the youngsters' homes and consist of a study of the books "Breezes of Confirmation" and "Walking the Straight Path."

On the weekends the youth present artistic performances proclaiming the Bahá'í Faith. These presentations are offered to the reading circle students, their families, neighborhood contacts, and other seekers in the cluster. At the end of each performance, an overview of the core activities is presented and the audience is invited to sign up to participate in them. As follow-up to the project, the cluster growth committee organizes home visits to the families of the reading circle students. These families are invited to study circles held in close proximity to their homes. Family gatherings are also scheduled on a monthly basis and incorporate devotions and presentations prepared by the junior youth.

Receptivity to the program

Time and again, when the Bahá'ís have initiated junior youth programs, they have found that there is substantial interest among the wider population for these endeavors. This high degree of receptivity is reflected in the relative rapidity with which programs have grown in many communities. Experience has also shown that in communities where other populations are not very receptive to the Faith, the junior youth can be a successful point of entry.

In **Cameroon**, a junior youth program has been started by the Bahá'í-inspired non-governmental organization Emergence—Foundation for Education and Development, in collaboration with the National Training Institute. After about eighteen months of concerted effort, by the end of 2004, 21 junior youth groups with 418 participants had been established in six clusters. The books on spiritual empowerment were used, and 90 percent of the participants were from the wider community.

The Azemikhah Institute in the **Central African Republic** decided to implement a junior youth program initially in the four most advanced clusters in the country. Three trainings for animators were held in 2004, in which 74 people participated. Within the next few months, 29 junior youth groups had been started, collectively benefiting over 450 youth, the vast majority of whom come from the wider society. The groups have gained the respect and admiration of the local community through the service projects they carry out.

By the end of 2004, the National Training Institute in **Kenya** had introduced junior youth spiritual empowerment programs into several of the advanced clusters in the country, particularly in Lugari, Malava, and Tiriki West. A total of 36 junior youth groups with over 320 members have been started. Many parents from the greater community have requested—even insisted—that their children be included in the junior youth groups, mainly because of the change in behavior observed in the youngsters who are participating.

In March 2005, the junior youth program was launched in **Nepal** in the advanced clusters of Morang, Sunsari, Kathmandu, and Lalitpur. Receptivity to the program has been high, not

only among the estimated 595 participants currently involved but also among the other members of the wider community, who encouraged junior youth to join the program. The animators have shown great enthusiasm and motivation in starting and sustaining the groups in a country that is still suffering from civil strife and unrest.

Reaching specific populations within a community

In many parts of the world, the friends are learning that there is particular receptivity to junior youth programs in specific populations within the community; further, there is often support from various institutions in the community to start such initiatives.

Tajikistan. In the Khudzhand cluster, a Bahá'í trained as an animator reached out to members of the Roma community. The Roma are among the only illiterate populations in the former Soviet Union. They are shunned by the local population and do not normally associate with Tajiks or Uzbeks residing in the same locality. It was after an animator training course that this believer decided to invite Roma children to her children's class. To her surprise many came, from ages 5 to 17, all of whom were illiterate. They began by listening and memorizing lessons from Ruhi Institute Book 3. She then divided the younger ones into a children's class and the older ones into a junior youth group. The animator met with them three times a week and introduced supplementary material to assist their learning. All the youth loved her so much that they would not accept any other animator when she wanted to rely on others for help.

The animator had an idea to take her group to the local hospital to meet with the dentist after the group had studied the section of the book "Breezes of Confirmation" in which the young people talk about their talents and what they like to do. She asked the dentist to tell them about his profession. He was so inspired by the dedicated services of this animator to the Roma community that he explained to them about their origin, their history, and the importance of education. He told the youth that they have to become the ones who change the fortunes of their people and grow to be outstanding and knowledgeable and serve their community.

The Roma youth have become inspired and transformed. They are determined to learn and to change. They said they want to become educated people, not beggars and thieves. They register their younger siblings for children's classes and look for excuses to come again and again to the animator's home to learn more. Before taking part in the program, it was impossible to involve the Roma youth in service activities, as they considered this an act of humiliation. After participating, they have approached service with joy and served in different ways, such as sweeping and cleaning streets in the neighborhood and whitewashing trees.

Australia. A psychology student, in the course of being interviewed for a volunteer counseling position at a multicultural center, mentioned her training as a junior youth animator. Her interviewer, who has had previous contact with the Faith, was very interested in the junior youth program when she explained it. He inquired about the possibility of starting a junior youth program at the center aimed particularly at young people who had recently immigrated to Australia. They were able to obtain government funding for a 20-week pilot project. The organizers felt that the biggest challenge would be finding interested participants, as other programs for this age group have had trouble doing so. However, enough young people signed up to form a group, which will start meeting soon.

Integrating activities for junior youth into a larger program for youth

Bahá'í-inspired organizations that work with older youth have found that junior youth programs can be a natural extension of their activities and that they support and reinforce the original lines of action.

Guyana. A Bahá'í-inspired agency, the Varqa Foundation, has incorporated a junior youth component into its larger effort entitled Youth Can Move the World (YCMTW). The YCMTW program provides youth with instruction that strengthens their identity as agents of personal and community transformation. After receiving training that prepares them as YCMTW facilitators, they return to their home communities and initiate youth activities with their peers and junior youth groups with those aged 12 to 15.

Haiti. In the Cabaret cluster, it had been challenging to foster the growth of the Faith due to the strong presence of a Baptist Mission. The junior youth program in this cluster has become an effective way to involve the wider community in the activities of the Faith.

Youth in Cabaret interested in working with 11 to 14 year olds received training that prepared them to serve as junior youth animators. During the practice portion of the training, they studied portions of “Walking the Straight Path” with junior youth from the cluster. The families of these young people observed the practice activity and appreciated the instruction being offered. Furthermore, other youth of the cluster, witnessing the enthusiasm being generated by this event, became interested in serving as animators. Subsequently, an additional 13 youth attended the animator training held the following week. These youth, many of whom were not Bahá'ís, were very grateful to have participated in the training. Six new groups, each consisting of between 10 and 15 junior youth, were initiated by 10 of these newly trained animators. It was reported that animators and junior youth regularly attend the Bahá'í activities in the cluster, such as reflection meetings and firesides. The animators have been invited to study the main sequence of courses and are expected to complete the sequence within a year.

Kosovo. The Bahá'í-inspired social and economic development project, Global Perspective Development Centre (GPDC), started working with youth over three years ago. In 2005, the junior youth program was integrated into the existing Global Motion project of GPDC, which uses the arts as a means of personal and social transformation, raising the capacity of young people to become active agents of change in their societies. The introduction of junior youth was a natural and logical step, building on the experience that had already been gained. Of the 100 or so participants in the project, a number of key individuals were chosen to become animators of junior youth groups. There are currently 12 animators working with an estimated 70 junior youth across the country. Participants are responding enthusiastically to the program and have already started sharing what they are learning with their siblings and peers.

Transformation of participants

Involvement in junior youth groups contributes to the moral development of the participants and builds a sense of solidarity among them. The texts that are used help the junior youth develop their powers of expression and to form a moral framework through which to understand their lives and the choices they face.

Canada. Statements from junior youth about their own experiences in the groups illustrate the numerous transformative effects of the program. In one group, in which participants are studying “Breezes of Confirmation,” the members were asked four questions:

What did you like about the junior youth group? What do you like about studying “Breezes of Confirmation”? What was your favorite activity? How was this experience different from years past? Following are some of the comments from the participants:

- I like discussing with the group about the different ideas that come out of the stories.
- I am also looking forward to go to the elderly care home and to plant trees. It’s fun when we do our book.
- We consult more in comparison to previous years. In previous years, the teachers talked more. This year we get to talk and make decisions. We get to read whereas before only the teacher would read the book.
- I like that there are lots of people that you can talk to, and there is lots of stuff that you can learn from the book. I liked the preparation of games and dances for the Feast. I enjoy meeting the friends.
- I like the activities for the Feast (for example, the skits). I like the way we talk in class. I like the questions and the stories.
- I like everything! We talk about the junior youth issues. I like the questions that were asked.

In another group, which was initiated by a junior youth and formed with her friends from school, the participants first studied “Breezes of Confirmation” and then began to study “Drawing on the Power of the Word.” One of the outcomes of the program has been the expression of the participants’ thoughts and feelings through creative writing.

Colombia. Young people are joining junior youth groups with substantial enthusiasm. Involvement in the groups has created a sense of belonging and strong friendships develop among the participants. It has been found that, as a result of participating in a group, young people’s confidence in their ability to contribute to the betterment of society has increased. Some of the service projects in which the junior youth groups in Colombia are involved include planting trees, visiting the sick and elderly, helping children’s class teachers with their classes, and assisting with the hosting of Nineteen Day Feasts, Holy Day celebrations, and devotional meetings.

India. Substantial experience has been gained as junior youth programs have been implemented in a number of clusters. One change seen in the youth is an increasing capacity to express their thoughts and feelings with greater confidence. It is common for junior youth groups to present dramas and skits before large gatherings in their home villages. At a gathering of over 400 people, the assemblage was amazed to see a few junior youth go up to the microphone to speak about their reaction to the program.

These young people had been involved in the previous year’s intensive campaign, taking part in about twenty-five days of study. A father in another cluster remarked that he was pleased to see his children becoming more expressive about their lives. He remarked that while previously they would not respond when he asked them what had happened at school during the day, after joining the program they could communicate more with him, describing what they had done both in and outside of school.

Changes in the behavior of the junior youth have been noticed by others. Parents see a difference even after only five or six weeks of participation in intensive campaigns, and sometimes this results in stimulating the parents’ interest in joining study circles. In a hostel

where 45 junior youth were staying, the warden had been struggling to maintain order and found the boarders very unruly. Groups were formed to study “Breezes of Confirmation,” and a change was noticeable within a short span of time. The warden was delighted to find that it was possible to have order in the hostel. He requested that the program be continued.

One insight that has been gained from the body of experience in India is that the degree of transformation in the junior youth depends largely on the animator. It seems that those who are most effective have been active in the institute process, have studied all the courses in the main sequence, and can set a good example in their interactions with the young people. Working with the junior youth takes the animator through a process of transformation as well.

Tajikistan. In this country much opposition to the Faith has been experienced from the community at large, but crisis has been turned into victory. One animator was residing in a building where the local Bahá’í Centre and the institute were situated. Neighbors, as well as local youth, developed a hostile attitude toward the Bahá’ís because the local clergy did their utmost to sow the seeds of prejudice in the hearts of the area residents. These youngsters would curse and laugh at the Bahá’ís, ignoring their greetings. The animator consulted with her junior youth sister and another animator and decided to invite some of these young people to join a junior youth group. Seven agreed and classes on “Breezes of Confirmation” started. Since these junior youth were sharing with their peers their experiences in the group, the numbers soon grew from 7 to 27. Although two animators offered to form more groups, the bonds among the participants were so strong that it was not possible to divide them. After just a few lessons, the attitude, language, and behavior of the youth changed, and the parents became very friendly towards the Bahá’ís and developed a special rapport with the animators. Whenever they met the animators, they would greet them warmly and invite them to their homes.

Thailand. In one priority cluster, it was decided early in the Five Year Plan that the focus would be on junior youth. Although there was receptivity among adults and youth, it had been observed that it was more difficult for them to make the same commitment as junior youth and therefore gain capacities needed to become effective human resources. The junior youth that were nurtured over a period of one to three years became committed youth, bringing their peers to core activities, and teaching children’s classes. Junior youth were serving as assistant teachers in the classes, gaining valuable experience. Thus a core group of active youth is growing in the cluster. They attend morning devotionals before school and then return afterwards to take part in core activities. The transformation of the young people was inspiring to the adults, who are now joining them in supporting core activities. A Bahá’í-run school in the cluster introduced the Bahá’í-inspired texts for junior youth into its program, contributing to an improved spirit and character at the school, and giving the friends greater confidence in reaching out to the wider community. The cluster has grown from 15 believers at the beginning of the Five Year Plan to a community of 213 participating in the core activities.